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INFO : CINCPAC
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HUE

FROM : AmEmbassy SAIGON

DATE: September 2, 1966

SUBJECT : Constituent Assembly Elections: The Outlook in Phuoc Tuy

REF :

In Phuoc Tuy province, seventy-three-year-old local notable LE THANH TUONG continues to hold a considerable lead over a field of challengers from the Saigon area. There are signs, however, that young lawyer NGUYEN HUU HIEU can nip Tuong in the stretch.

Opposition to Tuong appears to be jelling around Hieu, son of Nguyen huu Hung, the Minister of Labor. Hieu's strongest backers are a group of young civil servants and ARVN officers who energetically tout him as the only candidate able to defeat Tuong.

The remaining candidates, high school teacher NGUYEN THANH LUAN, ARVN Captain NGUYEN CONG CHINH, and civil servant LE QUANG TRUAT, can spoil Hieu's hopes but have no chance of winning Phuoc Tuy's single seat. All are Catholics, with little support outside Catholic ranks.

Tuong, the aging chairman of the Province Council, has deep roots in Phuoc Tuy. He served there as province chief under the French and has strong ties with hamlet and village notables. On the minus side, Tuong is ill, feeble, a Cao-Daiist (the sect is tiny in Phuoc Tuy), and poorly educated in comparison with Hieu.

There is evidence that the Buddhist clergy, or a part of it, is discreetly backing co-religionist Hieu, who is said to be close to Vien Hoa Dao moderate Thich Tam Chau. Tam Chau lunched in July with Province Chief Lt. Col. Le duc Dat and Hieu's father, who was formerly Chief Judge of Phuoc Tuy. Hieu himself is reported to have visited Tam Chau in nearby Vung Tau on one, perhaps two, occasions since arriving in Phuoc Tuy. Hieu's campaign manager, the local agent of the Viet-Nam Press, makes no secret of his devotion to the Buddhist leader.

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Province Chief Dat, supposedly torn between Tuong, whom he can control, and Hieu, has kept his preference a secret. Dat did, however, insure that NGUYEN VAN PHUONG's name did not appear on the ballot. Phuong, said by some province sources to have been a certain winner if he had become a candidate, was dismissed from the Provincial Council in June and then arrested for "activities advantageous to the Viet Cong". These activities were, in fact, the instigation of a muckraking expose series in Saigon daily Thoi Luan, alleging massive corruption on the part of Dat and several other province officials. These allegations, probably exaggerations, seem to be believed by Phuoc Tuy residents.

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This, coupled with the Royal Australian Regiment's rout of a Viet Cong mainforce battalion on August 19, has thrown the once-potent V.C. organization into confusion. An American advisor observes: "The V.C. desperately need a military victory in this province in order to lend credence to their election day threats. If the V.C. do not achieve such a victory, a large turnout is expected." Province Chief Dat is confidently predicting that more than 80% of the registered voters will go to the polls.

Although 110,000 people are now said to be under GVN control in Phuoc Tuy, a 60% increase over a year ago, and including all but a handful of its inhabitants, the voter rolls have expanded by only about 15%. Thus it seems that the provincial authorities remain wary of those areas which were V.C. redoubts until only a few months ago and have not registered many new voters there.

The Phuoc Tuy election, in summary, should test: whether vigor and education can overcome local ties and the traditional Vietnamese disposition to respect the aged; the ability of Phuoc Tuy Buddhist leaders to bring out the vote in favor of a candidate; and, to some extent, whether the striking success of the GVN pacification program in this province can be translated into increased support for the government, in the form of a large turnout on election day.

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